Redaction Warning

When redacting a passage from a paper document, one common approach is to overwrite the data with a black marker. To make sure someone viewing the blackened document cannot hold it up to the light and see reflections of letters through the marker, or to assure that there are no raised surfaces that might reveal the content that had been redacted, it is common practice to eliminate these shadows by making a photocopy of the blacked-out document. Just using the black marker is insufficient protection for the sensitive information.

Like their paper counterparts, electronic documents require special handling to eliminate the shadows, sometimes known as metadata, that might be manipulated to reveal the full original content. For example, when redacting a PDF document, users might be tempted to employ the highlighter function, with the highlighter set to black, to obscure the information they wish to redact. While this process makes the redacted information unreadable, it is still embedded in the document. Any technically savvy individual could download this document and, using standard software applications, remove the black highlighter, revealing the supposedly redacted information. Likewise, some users might be tempted to set the font color for redactable material to white, rather than black, making the information invisible to anyone viewing it. As with the blacked-out data, the redacted information still exists in the electronic document, making it possible for an experienced computer user to download the document, select the "invisible" information, change the font color, and view the redacted data.

There are effective means of eliminating data from electronic documents. The most simple is omission from the original — such as by representing Social Security numbers as XXX-XX-1234. Another alternative is the use of a commercially available software product to fully redact, rather than hide, the sensitive data. One program used by the Department of Justice is called Redax, but there are others. Additionally, users sometimes need to retain an unredacted electronic original while sanitizing another copy for a public file. When working with a word processing document, this can be accomplished by converting an unredacted copy of the document to PDF, then returning to word processing, revising the text, and converting the redacted version to PDF. If information must be redacted from an existing PDF document, users can save a copy of the PDF, use the text touch-up tool in a program like Adobe Acrobat Writer to delete or replace the data, then re-save the PDF document in its redacted form. Naming conventions should be observed to avoid confusion between the redacted and unredacted versions of documents.